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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: RECENTLY ARRIVED BURMESE MONKS TELL THEIR STORY

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 10 (STAFFDEL YEO)
[1](#)B. 07 CHIANG MAI 179 (REFUGEES BEMOAN EXILES)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/ECON, CG Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The demonstrations in Burma in August and September 2007 were spontaneous and organized mainly from inside the country, according to several participants who recently migrated to Thailand. Many monks were detained and sent to labor camps, they told StaffDel Yeo and visiting Rangoon PolOff in separate meetings. When the right spark is lit, demonstrations will begin again, they said. Their account confirms what we have believed all along regarding the minimal role exile groups in Thailand and elsewhere played in planning the demonstrations. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On January 5 and 6, StaffDel Yeo met separately with three monks who actively participated in the August-September demonstrations, and a group of six other participants. We met the same individuals on January 7 with a visiting Rangoon PolOff. In all four meetings, we covered several topics ranging from sanctions, to the role of the monks in the demonstrations, to their experiences hiding in Burma and crossing into Thailand.

Demonstrations Spontaneous

[1](#)3. (C) Though monks in Rangoon had written a letter that became public on September 14, 2007, saying they would begin demonstrating on September 18 if the Burmese Government did not rescind the fuel price hikes, the monks told us that they had not organized particular demonstration routes beforehand. Planning had begun in response to the Pakkoku incident on September 7-8, they said, via messages passed by walking from one monastery to another. It was agreed that monks who wanted to participate should meet at the Shwedegan Pagoda daily at 11:00 AM. According to U Kovida (the monk who led the

demonstration past Aung San Suu Kyi's residence, and whose Maggin Monastery was raided and forcibly closed by authorities), once monks assembled at the pagoda, they would pray for 30-60 minutes, and leaders would choose a marching route depending on what roads were open on that particular day. Another monk, U Aganya, said the monks leading demonstrations did not have contact with outside groups. The organization of the demonstrations in Pakkoku was similar, they said, with one to two monks walking from monastery to monastery delivering messages, and a committee of about five monks carrying out planning.

14. (C) The monks said there is widespread anger and discontent with the military government. They asserted they knew economic conditions were bad because they received very few and only small donations as compared to previous years. People nationwide, they said, constantly grumble about their impoverished conditions. There will be more demonstrations, they opined, speculating that future demonstrations would be slow to materialize due to participants' fear of repression, as occurred throughout Burma in the wake of the August-September protests. A journalist who recently crossed into Thailand agreed, saying the people are just waiting for a spark to rise up again. Another reason demonstrators may be reluctant to protest, he said, is that many hope UN Envoy Gambari's repeated visits will actually lead to some positive change, and they do not want to short-circuit that process by participating in demonstrations.

15. (C) In August and September, the monks said they played a leading role in the demonstrations, with the general public sitting it out first before becoming more active. The number of demonstrators reached a peak of 300,000 on September 24 according to Monk Ashin Csitarnanda. According to U Kovida, the day he led the demonstration past ASSK's house, approximately 2,000 monks participated. Public participation in the demonstrations grew by the day, but the public always let the monks take the lead. One monk said they were happy to do so

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because they believed their status would prevent them from being shot.

The Authorities' Brutal Tactics

16. (C) Though the fate of many of the monks who participated in the demonstrations remains unknown, the monks we met with firmly believe their colleagues were taken to labor camps. According to U Kovida, as many as 3,000 monks may have been detained in Rangoon alone. Our interlocutors estimate that less than half the monks who were in Rangoon before the demonstrations still remain there, most of them young ones. One monk told us that during the raid on his monastery, the 84-year old senior monk was among those shoved onto trucks and taken away. He also said that when the regime found out that some monks wounded during the demonstrations were being cared for at hospitals, soldiers stormed them, broke down the doors to their rooms, and took them away. U Kovida further alleged that some soldiers who shot at monks in Rangoon had been drugged with methamphetamines to dehumanize them.

Comment

17. (C) Though some exile groups in Thailand or elsewhere may have provided communications equipment to members of the pro-democracy movement inside Burma, and others have provided training on concepts such as non-violent political defiance, our encounters with these new arrivals did not yield any evidence that these exiles played an active role in organizing the August-September demonstrations. It would be helpful if recent arrivals to Thailand could persuade the existing exile community to unite in order to better support any future protests.

18. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Rangoon.
MORROW